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# Tunisian Political Climate from Aristocracy to Democracy and Presidential Coup: An Emerging Challenge to the Islamic Movements

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## Abstract

The popular uprising brought forth change in Tunisian presidential palace during 2011 as it entered a state of liminality while becoming a consolidated democracy from authoritarianism. However, after a decade of democratic transition, only the democratic success story of the Arab Spring is in danger after the decree of Tunisian President. This article aims to highlight that by using *Article 80* of the constitution, President has seized more power; and it narrates how it contradicts the constitution and negatively impact on political scenario. Furthermore, this study provides an analysis that how certain regional countries are trying to jeopardize the democratic system. Thus, the Islamic movement of Tunisia has been possessing a lion share on Country's political arena and is considered as the vanguard of Islamic identity and democratic process since 2011 revolution. Finally, it concludes that amid a lenient policy of Rashid Al-Ghannouchi, the founder of the Movement and speaker of the Parliament, towards Islamic doctrine in Tunisian political arena, coup from Tunisian president. Leadership of *Al-Nahdah* again playing a vital role to stable political climate through dialogue, but it seems that the situation is still in danger. In this article, the primary and secondary data has been analyzed by using Discourse analysis method with its approach of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA).

**Keywords:** Authoritarianism, Constitutional imploration, Democracy, *Ennahda*, islamic movement, Political crises, Presidential coup, Tunisia

## Introduction

Islamic political movements are actively involved in social, legal, political and other aspects of society. Scholars and policy makers have different perceptions towards political Islam. Post-Arab Spring scenario derived the attention of researchers towards emerging role of Islamic movements in their respective realms. So, this research article asserts that among other Islamic movements, Tunisian "*Ennahda*" led by a Muslim scholar and political activist, Rashid Al-Ghannouchi, took an initiative of shifting all other focuses of struggle towards the political one. So, according to his new interpretation, it is a true illustration of paradigm shift rather than "Political Islamist."<sup>1</sup> However, just after a decade of "Arab Spring" which led Tunisia towards freedom, freedom of speech, rights and democracy, on 25<sup>th</sup> of July 2021, President Saied decided to suspend the parliament and sacked the

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<sup>1</sup>Rashid Ghannouchi, "From Political Islam to Muslim Democracy: The Ennahda Party and the Future of Tunisia," *Foreign Affairs* 95(5), (2016): 60.

Prime Minister Hichem Mechichi, and announced that Saied himself rule by decree for the time being.<sup>2</sup>

Kais Saied, 63 years old, is an austere former constitutional law professor who sees it as his mission to eradicate corruption and bring justice to the country. He presented his moves to seize extra powers as an attempt to save Tunisia from rapacious elites, who have mismanaged it since 2011 revolution. However, main political parties of Tunis have charged the president of staging a “coup” against the mutiny and constitution, as he dismissed Prime Minister Hichem Mechichi, suspended the parliament and judiciary. The four largest parties of the Tunisian parliament along with the Islamist parties, *Ennahda*, Karama Coalition, Democratic Current and the secular party - Qalb Tounes and others have also reprehended these unconstitutional actions of the President.<sup>3</sup> In this regard, Sanskriti Falor narrates:

Tunisian parliament had passed a constitution in 2014, which laid out a semi-presidential system, means that President Kais Saied would share authority with the prime minister who exercises his power to the parliament. As a result of this rift the present political activity was started among these political actors, regarding their respective powers. Such type of power quarrelling had produced a muddled approach towards the COVID-19 pandemic, which worsened Tunisia’s economic and political malaise.<sup>4</sup>

Furthermore, the main focus of this article is that how:

the current political situation of Tunis is a hard trial for democracy that has shortly observed the tenth year of the Arab Spring. Since then, the unconsolidated democracy has found itself in a state of temporality, closely monitored and analyzed using a dichotic scale between democracy and authoritarianism.<sup>5</sup>

### 1.1. Methodology

This research paper involves and utilizes critical discourse analysis (CDA) for primary and secondary data. It means first we have to define the basic terms which are related to this research such as democracy, aristocracy, Islamic movement and politics by using the discourse analysis. Furthermore, the design of this research paper is interpretive; and by using this method we focused on different research articles and interviews of the leadership to get in depth knowledge about the topic

## 2. Meanings and Basic Assumptions

According to Merriam Webster dictionary ‘Politics’ literally refers to “the art or science concerned with winning and holding control over a government.” Aristotle viewed Aristocracy as

<sup>2</sup>Jonas Bergan Draege, James Dennison, “The Dynamics of Electoral Politics after the Arab Spring: Evidence from Tunisia,” *The Journal of North African Studies* 26, Issue 4, (2021): 88.

<sup>3</sup>Tarek Amara, Angus Mcdowall, “Tunisian Democracy in Turmoil after President Sacks Government,” *Reuters*, July 26, (2021).

<sup>4</sup>Sanskriti Falor, “Explained: Why Tunisian president has suspended the PM, dissolved Parliament,” <https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/explained-why-did-the-tunisian-president-suspend-the-prime-minister-and-dissolve-parliament-7438977/>

<sup>5</sup>Fadil Aliriza, “Tunisia’s Kais Saied becomes an Ordinary Politician,” *Middle East Institute*, January 14, (2022), <https://www.mei.edu/publications/tunisia-kais-saied-becomes-ordinary-politician>

“the rule of the few or by the minority.” Whereas, “‘Democracy’ means government by the people or rule of the majority.”<sup>6</sup>

Political scientists and scholars have described political Islam, Islamic movements and aristocracy in different ways. According to John Voll, political Islam is “any interpretation of Islam as a source of political identity and action”.<sup>7</sup>

### 3. Literature Review

#### 3.1. Tunisian Political Climate\_ a Historical Perspective

Tunisia had got independence from France in 1956. Habib Bourguiba was the leader who led independence movement and became the first President of the country in 1957. Habib Bourguiba presented himself to his nation, that he will reform the country according to Islam. During his political campaign, he mobilized masses on the popular slogan of religion.<sup>8</sup>

Though, after few years he changed his mind and started to establish a secular state. He was deeply influenced by the political thoughts and conduct of Mustafa Kamal Atatürk of Turkey, the founder of Modern Secular Turkey and a diehard liberal in his approach. Soon after the independence at early 1960s, he started to transform his state along the pure western lines, and announced that we follow the west in our economic and political conduct. Thus, the person who had mobilized masses on the basis of Islam transformed his strategy and pursued secular ideals of the west. He had radically changed the educational pattern of his country, and paved a way for the integration of secular values in his country. He replaced Arabic with French, and had a firm conviction that by doing so he will steer his country on the path of progress and development.<sup>9</sup>

Moreover, he introduced and legalized other laws which were considered as antithetical to Islam. He reformed the laws of marriage and divorce in the country that received immense backlash, especially from the religious circles. He also paved a way for the legalization of abortion rights. He prohibited women to wear *hijab* in institutions and public places. In early 1960s, he targeted the month of fasting (*Ramadan*), one of the five pillars of Islam, that it reduces economic production of country and announced that “We have an enemy to conquer the poverty.”<sup>10</sup> So, due to these radical reforms, influential religious people and parties considered him a person who proved to be a secular and liberal to his backbone. Later on, Bin Ali led the country on same principles established by Habib Bourguiba. At that time when these reforms were being processed in the country, Rashid Ghannouchi, who was passed out from the Zaytouna University and went to Cairo and Damascus to acquire higher knowledge. He returned to the country and established an Islamic association called (*Jammah al- Islamiyya*) in 1979, which was more of a political group rather than a political party. Later on, in 1981, Rashid Ghannouchi and Abd al- Fatah Morou transformed Islamic association to

<sup>6</sup>Merriam-webster.com/Dictionary/Politics.

<sup>7</sup>John O. Voll and Tamara Sonn. "Political Islam". *Oxford Bibliographies Online Datasets*, (2009). <https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780195390155/obo-9780195390155-0063.xml>. doi:10.1093/obo/9780195390155-0063. Also, See Jonas Bergan Draege, James Dennison, “The Dynamics of Electoral Politics after the Arab Spring: Evidence from Tunisia,” *The Journal of North African Studies* 26, Issue 4, (2021): 90-94. Where “Islam is a body of faith has something important to say about how politics and society should be ordered in the contemporary Muslim world and implemented in some fashions”.

<sup>8</sup>John L Esposito, Tamara Sonn, John O Voll, *Islam and Democracy after the Arab Spring* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016). 176-180.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., 185-190.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., 195-200.

a political party called the Islamic Tendency Movement (MTI).<sup>11</sup> The Islamic Tendency Movement was not the only religious movement in early years. There were other groups like “The Islamic *Shura* Party” headed by Hassan Ghodbani, “The Islamic Tendency Movement, the Islamic Vanguard” and the “Islamic Liberation Movement.” In fact, his clear stance and a firm commitment towards democracy; and his clarity on the thought that Islam and democracy are not incompatible made him popular among Tunisian public. As Rashid Ghannouchi stated:

If by democracy is meant the liberal model of government prevailing in the West, a system under which the people freely choose their representatives and leaders, and in which there is an alternation of power, as well as freedom and human rights for the public, then the Muslims will find nothing in their religion to oppose democracy, and it is not in their interest to do so anyway.<sup>12</sup>

Earlier, Islamic Tendency Movement (MTI) workers had arranged group discussions; they published Journals, gathered and organized students in universities. In 1981, the autocratic regime agreed to register other political parties. MTI submitted its request but officials rejected its application as a political party. However, due to the demand of reform, in 1987, a long thirty years regime of Habib Bourguiba had to end, when Zainel el Abidine bin Ali toppled the regime of country lifetime president and combatant. The rise of Bin Ali brought a ‘ray of hope’ of new political opening in country. Bin Ali ceded liberty and freedom to the political activists and prisoners and announced that he is starting a new political era in Tunisia. MTI again applied for the political recognition by changing its name to *Hizb Ennahda* (The Renaissance Party) but was refused by Bin Ali authorities.<sup>13</sup>

First election, after the rise of Bin Ali regime, was held in 1989. Independent candidates who belonged to *Ennahda*, had scored 13% of total casted vote and according to some other sources that had gained 30% vote in urban areas. This victory of Islamists threatened regime and they started to crush the movement. A large number of *Ennahda* members had arrested, imprisoned, tortured, and banned from employment and educational activities. Leadership of movement including Ghannouchi, were forced into exile. Since 1989 to 2010 *Ennahda* continued its struggle for its survival as a banned underground movement.<sup>14</sup>

Finally, in December 2010, a decades old authoritarian regime ended when a street vendor, Mohammad Bouzaizi, committed self-immolation in front of local government office, in protest of harassment that he suffered by the officials. His suicide triggered a revolution and in less than one-month, large scale of protests spread across the country, which enforced Bin Ali to flee.<sup>15</sup> *Ennahda*’s members participated in protest with other Tunisians. However, they didn’t use party flags to avoid providing an excuse to Bin Ali regime, that opposition parties are spreading unrest in country to seek power.<sup>16</sup> Social media played a key role in organizing the demonstration against the regime. According to the study nearly 91 percent of Tunisian universities students maintained active

<sup>11</sup>Rashid Ghannouchi, “From Political Islam to Muslim Democracy: The Ennahda Party and the Future of Tunisia,” 59-60.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*, 181.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, 61.

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*, 63-66.

<sup>15</sup>Eberhard Kienle, “Egypt without Mubarak, Tunisia after Bin Ali: Theory, History and the ‘Arab Spring,’” *Economy and Society* 41, 4 (2012): 35-45, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/03085147.2012.719298>

<sup>16</sup>Rashid Ghannouchi, “From Political Islam to Muslim Democracy: The Ennahda Party and the Future of Tunisia,” 70-75.

Facebook pages where they circulated the information and gathered public by using social media tool. Although the regime tried their best to control that tool but failed.<sup>17</sup>

The fall of Bin Ali and the reemergence of *Ennahda* movement inspired similar action in other countries like Egypt, Libya, Bahrain and Syria to come out against the repression, corruption, unemployment, poor living standards; and also for the right of political freedom, democracy, and freedom of speech.<sup>18</sup> In first and free elections, *Ennahda*'s grass roots network and a strong voice against the regime led it into a wide margin victory. However, for the sake of country's progress and unity, *Ennahda* formulated coalition government with two other secular parties and had set an excellent precedent in the Arab world.<sup>19</sup>

For the betterment and progress of the country, *Ennahda* has made compromises and reconciliation rather than revenge. *Ennahda*'s earlier stance was to formulate parliamentary system, but for the sake of country's unity, *Ennahda*'s parliamentarians agreed to formulate a mixed presidential-parliamentary system, as well as compromised, on the fact that the constitution would not cite *Shari'ah* as a source of legislation.<sup>20</sup> During *Ennahda*'s coalition government tenure and especially in 2013, the extremists Salafists carried out a series of attacks, which caused an assassination of two famous secular leaders. Opposition associated *Ennahda* to these assassinations, and as a result large number of parliament members boycotted their participation in drafting the constitution. At that time, *Ennahda* abdicated the government and handed over the power to the technocrats, to formulate the government. *Ennahda*'s intentions was not to keep itself in the power, but it intended to ensure that national constituent assembly could complete the drafting of Constitution to pave a foundation for democratic Tunisia.<sup>21</sup>

Presidential and legislative assembly elections in 2014, proved to be a milestone in the country's political transition. Arab Spring overthrew the authoritarian regime of former President Bin Ali, and the new democratic leadership progressed significantly toward initiating democratic institutions and practices in the country.

The continuation of two years deliberation and compromises brought leadership on one table, which paved their way in drafting a new constitution. During this transitional period, a dynamic political landscape emerged. Tunisia experienced transformation from a state with *de facto* one-party rule to the one with over 90 political parties.<sup>22</sup> *Ennahda* as leading party of governing coalition scrutinized the opposition parties closely, to lead the country through the transition. However, in 2013, the assassination of two leading opposition figures started unrest across the country and resulted in a political stalemate that threatened to derail the transition process. In these circumstances, through a national dialogue process backed by prominent civil society organizations and political parties, they reached to an agreement on a roadmap to end up this transitional period. That roadmap

<sup>17</sup>John L Esposito, Tamara Sonn, John O Voll, *Islam and Democracy after the Arab Spring*, 189.

<sup>18</sup>Noureddine Jebnoun, "Tunisia at the Crossroads: An Interview with Shaikh Rashid Ghannouchi," *ACMCU*, (2014): 9.

<sup>19</sup>Rashid Ghannouchi, "From Political Islam to Muslim Democracy: The Ennahda Party and the Future of Tunisia," 65-70.

<sup>20</sup>Kasper Ly. Netterstrøm, "After the Arab Spring: The Islamists' Compromise in Tunisia," *Journal of Democracy*, Volume 4, (2015): 110-114.

<sup>21</sup>Rashid Ghannouchi, "From Political Islam to Muslim Democracy: The Ennahda Party and the Future of Tunisia," 85-90.

<sup>22</sup>Michael J. Willis, *Politics and Power in the Maghreb: Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco from Independence to the Arab Spring* (Oxford Oxford University Press, 2014), 35.

forced coalition government to cede power to a caretaker government, adoption of a progressive constitution and the election of a new legislature assembly and president.

So, in 2014, under the new constitution general elections were held. An anti-Islamist platform, Nida Tunis Party (Tunis Calls) won 85 of the 217 seats in the parliament. This resulted in giving Nida Tunis the right to name a prime minister and lead a coalition government. A platform of moderate Islamism-*Ennahda* party-which had previously dominated the parliament, won 69 seats. *Ennahda* accepted the defeat and joined the coalition government with Nida Tunis to make country prosperous. Despite all the sacrifices in 2019 parliamentary elections, *Ennahda* had got the victory by winning 69 seats and became the largest party in Tunisian parliament.

#### 4. Current Situation

##### 4.1. Challenges to *Ennahda* and Tunis

This research article will now cover all the major challenges being faced by the movement. Since the foundation of *Ennahda*, cruelties and oppressions of country's authoritarian regime has been started. Furthermore, the movement also faced the foreign interventions to jeopardize the new born political process of Tunis, right after the Arab awakening and they got success on all borders. However, in new circumstances the challenges to the leadership of Tunisian Islamic movement have increased more and more, because they consider themselves as vanguard of democracy, political freedom and freedom of speech.<sup>23</sup> They have made compromises and adopted the path of reconciliation for the sake of country's progress and unity. So, the moderate Islamist party has been the most significant player in Tunisian politics since the country's Arab Spring revolution. It holds a plurality of seats in parliament. Since 2011 revolution, it is a reality that some certain gulf countries were not happy with the democratic process and tries to intervene by the money and media to jeopardize the democratic political process and to create difficulties and internal crises in the country.<sup>24</sup> However, *Ennahda* endured all these circumstances with patience and sacrifices to prevail democratic system in country.

So, in recent crises regional powers and military are backing President Kais Saied. *Ennahda* movement has demanded the President to lift the freezing of the parliament and to work in accordance with the constitution. Furthermore, they emphasized and reminded Kais Saied that political crises can be solved only through dialogue. Moreover, the movement urges all political forces and jurist organizations to respond to the call of dialogue to defend Tunisian democracy.<sup>25</sup>

In addition to this, on August 24<sup>th</sup>, 2021 right after a month of new decree, once again Tunisian President has extended the suspension of parliament until further notice. This move has raised concerns among Tunisian public about the future of democracy that the country had adopted after the revolution of 2011. So, after ten years of revolution, Kais Saied has started to put political leadership including several officials and former ministers under house arrest and imposed travelling ban on politicians, businessmen, legislature and judiciary.

Rashid Ghannouchi has faced criticism within the party's executive committee that he was failed to handle the recent political crises and as a result he dismissed the party's executive committee. He has taken this decision because prominent leaders from within his party has demanded that he quit

<sup>23</sup>Jonas Bergan Draege, James Dennison, "The Dynamics of Electoral Politics after the Arab Spring: Evidence from Tunisia," *The Journal of North African Studies* 26, Issue 4, (2021): 95.

<sup>24</sup>Kasper Ly. Netterstrøm, "After the Arab Spring: The Islamists' Compromise in Tunisia," *Journal of Democracy* 4, (2015): 90-95.

<sup>25</sup>Sarah E. Yerkes, "The Tunisia Model in Crisis; The President's Power Grab Risks an Authoritarian Regression," *Foreign Affairs*, August 06, (2021): 25.



the leadership due to adopting bad strategic choices since 2019 elections. Hence, amidst these power fluctuations, President Kais Saied seized the power by using *Article 80* of the constitution.

#### 4.2. What is *Article 80* of Tunisia's Constitution?

*Article 80* of Tunisia's constitution permits Tunisian President to keep extraordinary powers for 30 days "in the event of imminent danger," to the state or its functioning.<sup>26</sup> Nevertheless, even a layman can understand that *Article 80* of the constitution also bestows the authority that to the prime minister and parliamentary speaker to be consulted and that the parliament remains in "a state of continuous session throughout such a period", not suspended. Furthermore, according to 2014 constitution, the forum that could judge whether *Article 80* was appropriately applied or not was the constitutional court, which is still not formed. The formation of this court was mandated by the constitution. However, fragmented political landscape of Tunis prevented all parties from coming to an agreement on the court's membership. After President move, crises have escalated more when the speaker of constituent assembly of representatives Rashid Ghannouchi, deputy speaker Samira Ghannouchi and other parliamentary leaders, tried to disobey Saied's decree and assemble a session of parliament. However, an army unit blocked parliamentarian's entry. It seems that army, police and Tunisian General Labor Union (UGTT) have shown their loyalty to Saied and backed his decision while expressing concerns that he would stick to 30 days and would not expand his power further. However, he expanded his power and since the Presidential Coup, Kais Saied has been on a crackdown mission against political opponents, legislature and judiciary.<sup>27</sup>

#### 4.3. Possible Trajectories for Tunisia

Kais Saied's moved to rule the country by using *Article 80* of the constitution shall carries different contrasting meanings for the future of Tunisia. Firstly, according to the facts, I think that the development which was carried out by the president, will take the country back to dictatorship. Secondly, the developments could eventually lead Tunisia towards presidential democracy, which gives more assertive control to president rather than the semi-structured system. Hence, both arguments are prevailing among the think tanks; however, 'time' will decide that which approach is good for the future of the country.

### 5. Conclusion

This research article concludes that the popular revolution in Tunisia against corruption, poverty, and political repression which compelled the President bin Ali to leave the government in January 2011 is at stake after the new decree. The revolt which brought forth changes in Tunisian presidential palace, as well as it entered a state of liminality while becoming a consolidated democracy from dictatorship, once again is in danger. The agitation began against repression in the town of "Sidi Bouzid" when "Mohamed Bouazizi" a young Tunisian set himself on fire outside a municipal office on December 17, 2010. Mohamed Bouazizi was the only bread winner in his family. The local officials repeatedly demanded bribes from him, and at last they confiscated his merchandise. He went to authorities to complaint against the culprits; however, they refused to hear him. Consequently, he doused himself with gasoline and set himself alight. His plight set a popular uprising and anger which later on became a symbol against repression, injustice and economic hardship afflicting many Tunisians. So, this incident provoked public protests across the country against high unemployment, poverty, and political repression. Due to anger and protest of public, dictatorship era ended, and the country started new journey under the democratic system which

<sup>26</sup>Hicham Bou. Nassif, "Why the Military Abandoned Democracy," *Journal of Democracy*, 33 (1), (2022): 27-39. doi:10.1353/jod.2022.0002.

<sup>27</sup>Parker, "Tunisia's President Fires Prime Minister, Dismissed Government, Freezes Parliament," (2022): 3-5.



completed a decade in 2021. Nevertheless, after a long dictatorship of Bin Ali and the uncertainty in the political system, the democratic transition brought a political stability in the country. However, that uncertainty gave birth to the following crises which escalated disappointment in Tunisian people.

Hence, this research article highlights the following points: firstly, the 2014 Tunisian constitution proved to be a product of compromises made by the political elites to reduce agitation in the country. However, the rivalry, political sluggishness and parliamentary deadlock due to the constitutional power sharing agreement among political elites led the country towards constant situation of power trading and disputes. Secondly, the bad economic condition of Tunis failed to serve the people and fulfill their desires. Furthermore, the Covid-19 pandemic has created more insecurity among the Tunisians. So, as a result of pandemic and mishandling of the government, large number of casualties and economic problems broke out among the public. These are the issues which granted opportunity to President Kais Saied and created a strained and insecure situation in the political system.

Moreover, research article concludes that the Democracy in Tunisia is still at risk and the new decree of President Kais Saied to grab power by suspending parliament and dismissing prime minister has circumvented the political process. Although he has alleged that parliament's suspension is temporary. His mandate is democratic one; and no matter how problematic a parliament is, its best dismissed with ballots not with bullets. So, we can say that through a process of meaningful dialogue, Tunisia can get out from this chaotic situation. Furthermore, other democratic countries should have to play their role, because certain gulf countries are trying to jeopardize the democratic process because they feel it as a threat for their own governing system. *Ennahda*'s call to stakeholders for a dialogue is the only option to get rid of country from this crisis. *Ennahda* indicated that we, as governing regime, should learn and point out our weaknesses from the crises. Furthermore, for the sake of democracy, our struggle will be continuing. Moreover, once again the extension of suspension until further notice will increase political tension in country.

Last of all, President Saied justified his power grab by using *Article 80* of the constitution. "Saied proposed a plan which included a constitutional referendum on July 25, 2022 and a renewed parliamentary election at the end of 2022."<sup>28</sup> So, president has organized constitutional referendum on 25<sup>th</sup> July 2022. The main purpose of the referendum was to adopt a new constitution which justifies and corrects the course of the revolution and president coup against his government and elected parliament in 2021. The referendum results show a landslide victory to president with a low turnout. Opposition parties boycotted the referendum calling that Kais Saied is going to legitimize his power by conducting this so-called referendum. Economic hardship and political uncertainty still brand mark Tunisia. Nevertheless, the politics of Tunisia have invariably been astonishing to policymakers and observers. At Present, the Tunisian political situation is alarming. It is envisaged that time will decide about the future of Tunisia.

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<sup>28</sup>Reuters, "Tunisia's" President calls Constitutional Referendum followed by Elections in 2022," *The Guardian*, December 14, (2021), <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/dec/14/tunisia-president-calls-constitutional-referendum-followed-by-elections-in-2022>.

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